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ABSTRACT

Difficulties have arisen in implementing the principles of modern rhetoric in the classrooms of teachers who are interested in and committed to the principles of modern rhetoric as well as in the classrooms of teachers who use writing primarily for drill and evaluation. Although problems such as time limits, pressure from parents, lack of administrative support, class size, and differences in pedagogical beliefs have been cited as possible causes for the difficulties, differences also underlie traditional and modern rhetorics that go beyond the classroom to the personalities of teachers. An examination of the philosophical differences in the roles of learning and writing reveals that in the modern paradigm there is a dialectic between chaos and order engaged in by the learner and facilitated by the teacher that most teachers find uncomfortable. A case study of a fifth grade teacher in an urban school lends strength to this theory. If teachers are to extend and develop the uses of writing in the classroom, they must examine their anxiety about using methods that they fear will result in a loss of teacher control. (DF)

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What Influences the Way Teachers Use Writing in Their Classrooms: The Dialectic of Chaos and Order

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An interesting problem has arisen for those of us teachers and teacher educators committed to bringing modern rhetoric into the classroom. We see on the one hand, teachers who use writing traditionally, largely for drill and evaluation, who do not seem to be curious as to what this new rhetoric is, or who claim that it is no different from what they already do. On the other hand we see teachers committed to the principles of modern rhetoric yet who sometimes have difficulty setting up classrooms according to those principles. Something seems to get in the way of having groups, of having students revise, of using generative writing, or of having students set their own topics.

In asking why such difficulties might arise, why some teachers may be averse to considering such change at all and why others may have trouble implementing such change, there are ready answers: time, lack of administrative support, pressure from parents, size of classes, and difference in pedagogical beliefs, and these truly are problems. However I want to suggest that there are philosophical differences that underlie these two rhetorics, traditional and modern, that point to another possibility, the possibility that one source of this difficulty goes far beyond the classroom and views of learning, goes in fact to our very personalities.

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I want to make a case for this claim by examining the philosophical differences between traditional and modern rhetoric and then by looking at a case study of a teacher in the light of those differences. I begin by asking this question: What is learning in each of these paradigms and what follows as to the role of writing?

Briefly, learning in the traditional paradigm is almost wholly externally directed. Experts determine what is important to know of the subject matter and teachers determine how it will be learned. Information is transmitted in a logical, orderly, predictable manner. The students' responsibility is to take in this information in the way the teacher has deemed appropriate. In the modern paradigm learning is described by Dewey, Bruner, Piaget and others as much more internally directed. Learning is a matter of going forward into the unknown, a reorganization and reconceptualizing of what we know. It is not orderly; it cannot be packaged. It involves chaos. Not the chaos of an undisciplined class, but the chaos of unsureness, of being unsure of an idea we were sure of before and struggling to return to order, for the moment at least. As opposed to the traditional paradigm where learning is an orderly monologue given by the expert, the teacher, learning in the modern paradigm is a dialectic between chaos and order engaged in by the learner, faciliated by the teacher.

It follows that in traditional rhetoric the role of writing is to give students a way to find and remember that external meaning. Thus, drill and testing are two much used strategies in

this paradigm. In modern rhetoric, where the learner must be the meaning maker, the role of writing is to help propel the writer into this chaos and then to enable the writer to move through it, generating questions, speculating, connecting, revising, responding.

Because modern rhetoric relies on teachers working from this assumption of what writing and learning are, the extent to which teachers are able to tolerate and engage in this dialectic of chaos and order will have a great affect on the extent to which, and even the willingness with which, they encounter modern rhetoric. The difficulty, at least theoretically, now becomes apparent: Most of us have been raised in a culture in which the principles of traditional rhetoric and traditional learning theory are paramount. To move into another paradigm requires a lot of work.

But what I would like to argue is that it not only requires work because we must intellectually rethink our positions. (There is that dialectic!) No, I want to argue that it also requires work because most of us are not comfortable with this dialectic. We prefer to stay with order or to stay with chaos, but the dialectic is uncomfortable, and this, I contend, has to do with who we are as people, our personalities.

My evidence comes from reading- Nancy Martin, Carl Rogers, and others, and from observations of myself and discussions with colleagues and the many teachers I have worked with. It comes more formally from a year long naturalistic study of three

elementary school teachers in which I was trying to understand what influences teachers to use writing as they do. In giving you a portrait of one teacher, Susan, my intention is to share with you some information that strongly suggests that we cannot separate ourselves in school from ourselves out of school. Our whole selves, including our fears, are involved when we teach writing. Today I am concerned with one difficulty, engaging in the dialectic of order and chaos.

This teacher, Susan, is a fifth grade teacher in an urban elementary school, a veteran of nine years in the school system. She is on the far end of the spectrum in her unwillingness to engage in the dialectic of order and chaos for herself and with her students. She avoids disorder in every way she can, and is very successful in doing that. I believe that her refusal to admit disorder is not only a pedagogical theory but is one of Susan's most articulated self concepts that, she herself says, aptly describes her self both in and out of school. While Susan is an extreme, I submit that what we can see so clearly in her, exists in all of us to a greater or lesser degree. Through observing Susan we find a way of looking at our colleagues and ourselves and understanding a little more what may prohibit us all from allowing our students to make meaning to their fullest capacity. Let me describe four ways in which Susan made certain that she would not have to become engaged in the complexities and chaos that are certain to be present when learning is going on.

The first way: Susan is disinterested in knowing, refuses to find out- what is going on inside her students' minds that may be different from her assumptions of what is going on. It seems perhaps, far from writing, but since writing exists in the context of the larger classroom, we need to begin there. Susan is a traditional teacher in the sense that she sees learning as the mastery of a sequential, hierarchical order of skills that can be completed by the whole class at the same time. In all of the time I observed Susan and in all of the talks we had, I never saw her ask her students what it was that they were thinking or experiencing as she taught them skills. She assumed she knew what they were thinking. However there were times when it was clear she didn't. For example, I was in the classroom one day when she was drilling the children on their multiplication tables. She asked Margaret, whom I was sitting next to, to multiply two numbers, say 9 and 7. I saw Margaret's mouth moving and then she gave the correct answer. Later I asked Margaret what she had been saying to herself. She said she had been counting by 7's until she got to 9 7's. And later I said to Susan, "I noticed Margaret's mouth moving when you asked her to multiply." Susan said yes, she was reciting the whole problem just as she had taught them, 9x7=, in order to find the number.

Is there really any problem with that as long as students get the right answer? I believe there were consequences for Susan's students. When they couldn't seem to get the answer to a math problem, for example, Susan talked out the steps and had

the students do the calculations. In this way they arrived at the correct answer., "Now you understand," Susan said. But what did they understand? They knew how to add or subtract when they were told that that was the necessary calculation but could they replicate the sequence themselves? Was there some assumption they were making that blocked their understanding? Susan could not know this without asking them or observing them try the problem themselves, yet I rarely saw her do either. So her students had no guide for their confusion. They could only mimic a process. And Susan was safe from problems that might demand more than breaking one step into smaller steps.

The second way: Susan protected herself from the complexities of her profession. She allowed herself as few questions about teaching as she allowed her students about their subjects. When I asked her to talk about issues that she was curious about in the classroom, she said there were none. The only question she articulated to me over a year of interviews, was that of why children who had been problems in other classrooms were not problems in hers. After a couple of years, she said, she had discovered the best way for her to teach and it worked. Other methods achieved the same results; the only difference was the route by which they got there and that was a reflection of a teacher's personality. The best example I can give was her comparison of herself and another teacher who is an open classroom teacher. "Basically [we teach] the same way." she said. "Question-answer. If a kid answers a question with one

word, Elaine says, 'I am asking a question. I want a complete sentence.' That's what I do."

In claiming that they essentially taught the same way, a view I would disagree with having observed and interviewed the open classroom teacher also, Susan ignored the issue of the kinds of learning that occur in a classroom where children work alone following step by step instructions of the teacher and the kinds that occur in a classroom in which children have a degree of autonomy and collaborate with other students. She ignored the issue of whether memorization and drill, her primary strategies, were the same as analysis and speculation which the open classroom teacher used. Without evaluating if one is a "better" way, and while acknowledging that children in each class improved their test scores, is it so clear that different methods achieve the same results? In our discussions, these were not questions to Susan. She would not enter that intricate and complex range of what learning is, and in keeping this order she limited both her growth and the growth of her students.

In Susan's view of herself as a writer, and we are beginning to get closer to home now, we can see a third way in which she avoided the disorder of thought and the dialectic with order. Over and over Susan told me she hated writing. In the only overt action prompted by our talks, she asked all the teachers at lunch one day how <u>they</u> felt about writing. At our next meeting she proclaimed victoriously, "I'm not the only one. Everyone agreed with me. Writing is terrible." Her hatred of writing came

down to the difficulty of getting her thoughts in order. "I'm not a writer," she said. "It bores me...writing is confining. You have to keep your thoughts in order and your mind might drift to what is not related or not important. When you talk you don't have to have a transition [when you change thoughts]. You don't have to go back (2-7-85)...I just don't enjoy writing. I- I just don't enjoy it. I'd sooner get a thank you note that says- that already has words, like 'Thank you very much.'" (5-2-85)

It seems strange that Susan should complain of writing as confining when in fact her teaching might be seen as confining. Yet I think it is a real clue. I believe writing is uncomfortable for Susan because she is forced to acknowledge the confusion- the lack of connection between thoughts, that beginning of chaos where she is unsure. These statements and others like them convince me that her reluctance to allow disorder is pervasive in her life. She avoids it even when writing a note to a friend. It is also a hint that such confusion <u>does</u> exist whether or not she likes it, but that she creates a world in which she tries to keep such disparity from becoming conscious.

There was a fourth way in which Susan avoided the dialectic of learning and that was in her use of writing in the classroom, and now we are home. You could surmise that Susan, uncomfortable with chaos, would not welcome the use of a tool with which chaos is almost by its nature revealed (remember that note to friends.) So it may be sad but not surprising that over a school year she had her students write:

--seven creative stories, one a month from October through April,

--three book reports,

--twenty spelling sentences each week, and

--exercises in arithmetic, phonics, language skills that filled three thick spiral notebooks.

On the average, students wrote 200 words a month in pieces of greater length than a sentence and almost all were narratives, either fictions the children created or paraphrases of books they had read. There were no lists, no questions, no letters, no journals, no stories about themselves, no fables, no poems.

As Susan talked about the way she used writing in her classroom, I began to understand that the importance to her of sequential, hierarchical order that did not make room for uncertainty, questions, chaos applied to writing as well as to other subjects. She did not have her students write an essay until October because, she said, they needed to learn how to write sentences and paragraphs first. "When they come in here," she said, "they don't know how to write." The writing of the book report was preceded by three weeks of work on identifying and writing a main idea. To keep order was a central concern. In May she said, "The kids have really learned to keep their stories in some sort of a sequence. At the beginning of the year they used to jump from one topic to another- they really have come to learn how to start a story off, put a body into it, and put a conclusion into it." (5-2-85)

While students do not learn to write simply by writing, that is an important starting place. Such a starting place did not exist for Susan's students. In addition to not encouraging fluency, Susan was not aware of the variety of uses for writing, such as writing to speculate, to generate ideas, to ask questions. When I suggested that such uses did exist, she did not pursue this with questions or discussion. In one interview she discussed the reasons she did not do more writing and did not seem aware of the contradictions in her reasons. She began by saying, "I don't have time any more." And then, "They're not on that kind of level. They're very slow. They need to have a very different kind of skills..." And then, "on this level they they write because they have to. It's a task; they're too young. At this age they're not into anything like reading and writing" (despite statements at other times that her students loved to write). And finally, the writing the kids do "is sufficient, enough. We do sentences every day which is a form of writing."

It would seem that talking about oneself as a teacher for 45 minutes a week over a school year, and being observed, would probably cause a person not to change but to reflect on their own practices. But Susan never wondered, with me at least, about her use of writing in the classroom. She did not initiate discussion nor did she reflect on her own actions. She was invested in protecting the order she had made of writing.

As long as Susan refuses to enter more consciously and more

wholly that dialectic of chaos and order which is learning, it is unlikely she will provide a supportive and guiding environment for her students in terms of this dialectic. In fact, such a learning environment is not provided. We can see her students cut off from making their own meaning when Rachel asks to recite the process for multiplying three digit numbers and Susan cuts her off. When Ali tries to explain the mistake he made and is cut off. When they read a story about Raccoon brought in from the woods by a boy. What does it mean to take a wild animal out of its environment? Is it fair, Susan asks, and after the children talk about it for a minute or two she steps in and gives the answer. When book reports are primarily paraphrases of the books and the two questions, do you like it, would you recommend it to a friend are in a sense write offs, not practiced, not dwelt on. When these things happen we can see how Susan's students are not being encouraged to make meaning because of her discomfort.

If Susan simply saw learning as skills taught in a lockstep manner, this would not be enough evidence to claim that her restricted use of writing had to do with personal discomfort. However, she did not seek to know her students' difficulties with their work, she did not seek to understand and search out the complexities of her profession, she rejected the chaos that came with her own writing. Even her room showed her great passion for order: It was always quiet, never in commotion, the desks continually being lined up, corners abutting not haphazardly but at right angles. The toys that the children brought in in the

morning and put on Susan's desk were arranged like advancing armies in perfect formation, and the white chalk on black construction paper pictures of winter framed the doorway inventively and symmetrically. The care for design struck me as artistic. But Susan protested, "I'm not artistic. I just like order."

I claim then that learning takes place when students are invited to ask questions and encounter material that makes them reconsider what they have previously thought, that when a teacher is reluctant to enter the dialectic of learning, her students are deprived of that also, and that the reasons for which a teacher may not feel comfortable with such a concept of learning is related not only to her or his intellectual beliefs, but to much more deep seated attitudes some of which probably concern order and disorder.

Perhaps Susan is an extreme case, but I maintain that if we listen to ourselves, we will all hear this-- a propensity to live on one side or the other of this dialectic between order and chaos that is learning.

In a workshop with teachers who <u>were</u> having their students work in groups, who <u>were</u> having their students do generative, speculative writing, revision, responding, finding their own subjects, we were discussing what our personal fears might be that could account for the difficulties we sometimes have implementing these principles. At first there was silence, and then one participant said, "Teachers want to be experts." Asked

if she could put that in terms of herself as a teacher, she said, "Most teachers want to be experts in their classroom." Asked again if she could use herself, I, as the subject, she said, "I want to be an expert."

It took a while for someone to follow that. It seemed as though this were a question people were unused to speaking about, at the least in public and perhaps in private too. As one participant said, "People ask what we are doing, but no one ever asks why." More nervousness began to surface: "I'm afraid my students won't think I'm teaching." "I'm afraid my colleagues will think I'm crazy." And then, "I'm afraid of the chaos." "I'm afraid of the disorder." "Disequilibrium, it's that I'm afraid there will be disequilibrium and I'll never get back to order."

I am not a psychologist and cannot determine the origin of such fears. Common sense tells me that they may be familial, they may stem from the fear that we don't have ways to deal with such chaos or that we don't have ways to come to some closure. Whatever the origin, it seems clear to me that when we try to change ourselves or others we are working with constructs far more pervasive than pedagogical beliefs. We will have to take this into account as we try to bring the principles of modern rhetoric into our classrooms, perhaps experiencing such chaos with someone trained to help us move through it, as at the Bard Institute or with the National Writing Project, where participants themselves write and revise, perhaps by discussing and becoming aware of those constructs which prohibit us, by

setting up support groups in schools where we are not competitors but colleagues engaged in a dialectic with fellow teachers.

The issue that we as educators of both students and teachers must face is that methods and principles are not teacher-proof. They do not exist objectively and purely but are recreated by the teacher who uses them. If we fear the loss of control we will take any method, progressive or traditional, and recreate it so that we are comfortable with it. Or we will deny its value altogether. If we are to continue to extend and develop our uses of writing in the classroom and the powers of our students to learn, we must begin to examine these private but pervasive attitudes and anxieties that invisibly but undoubtedly can guide us as forcefully as our principles.